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Information and communication technologies for development

Information and communication technologies for development: progress in the implementation of General Assembly resolution 57/295

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 57/295 of 20 December 2002 on the development of a comprehensive information and communication technologies (ICT) strategy for the United Nations system in the framework of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination.

This is the fourth report of the Secretary-General pursuant to General Assembly resolution 57/295. Since the adoption of that resolution, the Chief Executives Board for Coordination, supported by its High-level Committees on Programmes and Management and its ICT Network, has made significant progress in translating the United Nations system ICT strategic framework into specific initiatives and projects, including the elaboration of a knowledge-sharing and knowledge management strategy, and the launch of specific activities through which to pursue the priority initiatives identified in the strategic framework. The Information and Communication Technologies Task Force has contributed to this effort, and, particularly, to harnessing the energy of the entire United Nations system so as to further close the digital divide and help ensure that the benefits of ICT have as wide a reach as possible.

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 57/295 of 20 December 2002, the General Assembly, affirming the value of information and communication technologies (ICT) as a strategic tool to enhance the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of the development of programmes and technical activities of the United Nations system, called upon the United Nations system to create a comprehensive ICT strategy. In the same resolution, the Assembly took note of six elements that should be included in the strategy, all of which emphasized the need for synergy and coordination among programmes and activities of United Nations system organizations.

2. The first, second and third reports of the Secretary-General on the subject (A/58/568, A/59/563 and A/60/323) noted the system-wide advancement of ICT and charted the growth of inter-agency collaboration in ICT, with its shift from the purely technical to the strategic, mirroring the evolving importance now placed by many organizations on the role of ICT in delivering critical administrative and programmatic services. The present report, the fourth, examines recent activities of the United Nations system directed towards achieving progress in implementing General Assembly resolution 57/295, in both the operational and development arenas. In the area of ICT support to administrative and management processes, the system is guided by the United Nations system ICT strategic framework. In the development area, the Information and Communication Technologies Task Force has contributed significantly to fulfilling the objectives of the strategic framework, particularly by working to strengthen the linkages between ICT and the internationally agreed development goals.

II. United Nations system ICT strategic framework

3. Guided by the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination High-level Committee on Management, which has had the subject of ICT in its agenda since 1999, the United Nations system ICT community has, over the past several years, delivered tools to enhance inter-agency knowledge-sharing through systems like the United Nations system Extranet, and has progressively strengthened inter-agency collaboration on policies that guide ICT operations. In 2004, the ICT Network, under the guidance of both High-level Committees of the Chief Executives Board, produced a United Nations system ICT strategic framework, which, in a charter defining the key principles that enabled organizations of the United Nations system to collectively harness the power of ICT so as to improve services to stakeholders, introduced 15 specific initiatives intended to advance collaboration on ICT across the system. Through a process of prioritization, the ICT Network of the High-level Committee on Management identified priority initiatives likely to have immediate impact and formed working groups to more fully develop them. This report presents the outcomes of several of these priority initiatives, including services-sourcing, knowledge-sharing, enterprise resource planning (ERP) applications, ICT governance and ICT training.

4. Recognizing that the rapid decline in telecommunications costs offers the opportunity to widen the scope for delivery of ICT support functions, organizations are actively exploring the opportunities for shared services. For United Nations organizations, the option of moving certain ICT operations outside of the organization does not itself necessarily imply outsourcing in the traditional sense;

however, the option can include taking advantage of the close relationships that exist between United Nations organizations and thus "in-sourcing", where one United Nations organization or an inter-agency entity performs a service for others. This model is not new, since for many years the International Computing Centre has been providing ICT services to United Nations organizations using a cooperative model, which results in significant savings to its members. Since the benefits of shared services rises in direct proportion to work volume, a unified approach to determining strategies for outsourcing ICT services could benefit all organizations. Through the High-level Committee on Management, the organizations of the system are documenting and defining best practices for service-sharing, which would allow organizations to make the best decisions possible when considering this complex topic, and are working to identify which services offer the best opportunities for efficiencies, leading to a pilot implementation.

5. Another critical objective, namely, enhancing knowledge-sharing across the entire United Nations system, has been assigned a high priority by both High-level Committees of the Chief Executives Board. In July 2005, the High-level Committee on Programmes called for the formation of a task force to develop a system-wide knowledge-sharing strategy, and requested that such a strategy should include an overview of the best knowledge-sharing practices in use across the system. The High-level Committee stressed that the strategy should address both managerial and programmatic requirements and should be geared towards enhancing the system's capacities to advance the objectives of the United Nations Millennium Declaration,[1] particularly its development goals.

6. Organizations of the system, through the ICT Network, proposed terms of reference for such a task force to the High-level Committee on Programmes at its eleventh session in February 2006. The High-level Committee considered that the initiative should be approached from a strategic perspective, casting ICT in the role of a catalyst in the exploration of how organizations can work together in many different contexts, including at the country level, and particularly of how to enhance the system's overall capacity to advance the objectives of the Millennium Declaration. In addition, the task force will be exploring how organizations can overcome cultural and policy barriers that inhibit cross-organizational knowledge-sharing activities. Taking into account work already completed in this area, including activities of the United Nations Development Group, the Office of Internal Oversight Services and other entities, the task force has been mandated to focus on an assessment of the existing inter-agency knowledge-sharing landscape, develop a strategy to improve this cross-agency knowledge-sharing, and propose a road map for implementation.

7. In the area of managing financial and other resources, most United Nations organizations have implemented or are currently implementing enterprise resource planning (ERP) applications and have found that the benefits of these applications, when carefully implemented, far outweigh the costs involved. In the same perspective, organizations of the United Nations system are increasingly seeing the value of sharing experiences and identifying cross-agency opportunities to achieve efficiencies in their implementation and operation. In this light, a working group of the ICT network is addressing issues in three areas: the conceptual issues involved in enterprise resource planning selection and implementation; the operational issues

[1] See General Assembly resolution 55/2.

related to running the enterprise resource planning applications; and the special issue of identifying opportunities for sharing payroll and human resources solutions.

8. Ensuring that ICT investments fully align with organizational goals and meet expectations requires an effective decision-making mechanism. Some organizations have detailed processes in place for this purpose, while others utilize more informal methods. To create a more consistent approach to ICT decision-making, and to help organizations ensure that they have an effective ICT governance capability, the ICT Network is developing a compendium of governance models in use throughout the system, along with a methodology that will allow organizations to assess their own governance capacity. The emphasis is on identifying the key elements of an effective governance framework that can guide organizations in deciding how best to manage their ICT operations. This effort has gained particular relevance, a relevance that extends beyond the need to improve organizational ICT technical capabilities, given the recent initiative of the General Assembly for a review of governance mechanisms across the United Nations system.

9. The successful implementation of an ICT strategy depends on many factors, one being the ability of middle- and senior-level managers to appreciate the value of technology and apply it appropriately so as to improve operations. Increasingly, the operational improvements that senior managers are called upon to develop and implement involve information systems. In these circumstances, the ICT Network is giving high priority to strengthening the ability of managers at all levels to effectively integrate information technology solutions into their areas of responsibility and has been developing, in conjunction with the International Computing Centre and other bodies, a training curriculum intended to support training organizations in this critical management area.

10. Through these and other priority initiatives, the Chief Executives Board for Coordination, through the High-level Committees and the ICT Network, is endeavouring to ensure that the system moves towards a cohesive ICT approach, one that works to reduce duplication of effort and increase efficiencies and, most critically, serves to improve the ability of the United Nations system to effect the sharing of knowledge among its organizations and with its stakeholders.

III. Information and Communication Technologies Task Force

11. The Information and Communication Technologies Task Force has made an important contribution to the formation of a comprehensive ICT strategy for the United Nations system. In July 2003, the Task Force organized a meeting with the members of the IT Managers Network of the High-level Committee on Management. At this meeting, and in subsequent consultations, several ideas and concepts were formulated which are currently being actively followed up. Some have resulted in major proposals, such as the establishment of the post of Chief Information Technology Officer for the Organization at a policy level and launching of a change management fund, which were pursued with top United Nations management and in the relevant intergovernmental and inter-agency processes. Relevant proposals in the report of the Secretary-General, entitled "Investing in the United Nations: for a stronger Organization worldwide" (A/60/692 and Corr.1) and recent decisions of the General Assembly have resulted in significant steps in these directions.

12. Leveraging information and communication technologies so as to attain the internationally agreed development goals has been at the heart of the activities of the Task Force. In its four years of operation (its mandate concluded in December 2005), the Task Force consistently used its global platform to showcase and advocate the enabling and catalytic roles that ICT can play across the broad United Nations development agenda, to launch initiatives designed to provide policy advice and assistance in building capacity in developing national e-strategies for achieving economic and social progress, and to foster collaboration and partnership. The participation of several United Nations entities in the work of the Task Force enabled it to make an important contribution to facilitating inter-agency cooperation to this area within the United Nations system.

13. With the 2005 World Summit and the Tunis phase of the World Summit on the Information Society having both occurred in the latter half of 2005, the Task Force leveraged the unique opportunities offered by those events to further strengthen the linkages between ICT and the internationally agreed development goals and to strategically align their outcomes. Three high-level round tables, organized by the Task Force in collaboration with several United Nations organizations and funds as well as other partners, during the substantive session of 2005 of the Economic and Social Council, on the eve of the 2005 World Summit and at the World Summit on the Information Society in Tunis — were instrumental to this end.

14. The substantive contribution of the Task Force to the preparations for both the Geneva and Tunis phases of the World Summit on the Information Society included sponsoring several regional meetings, organizing a series of global forums, and supporting and participating actively in events organized by other stakeholders. The Task Force also tapped its extensive network to involve other stakeholders from the private sector and civil society in the preparatory process of the World Summit on the Information Society. During the Tunis phase of the Summit, the Task Force participated in the exhibition, organized a number of substantive side events (including in cooperation with other United Nations system entities) and launched several policy publications.

15. The Information and Communication Technologies Task Force Working Group on ICT Indicators and MDG Mapping (led by Canada) made a significant contribution to the 11-member Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development.[2] Through its active engagement, the Working Group contributed to the creation of a set of core ICT indicators, released at the second (Tunis) phase of the World Summit on the Information Society in the publication entitled "Core ICT Indicators". Members of the Working Group consolidated and edited another publication entitled "Measuring ICT: the global status of ICT indicators", which was distributed in Tunis by the Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development. The Task Force also jointly organized the Summit parallel event entitled "Measuring the information society" (15 November 2005).

16. While the Information and Communication Technologies Task Force mandate concluded in December, consultations throughout 2005 confirmed the need for an open, inclusive forum in which the various stakeholder groups could continue to interact to ensure an environment conducive to the implementation of the decisions

[2] Further information is available from http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/partnership/ and from http://measuring-ict.unctad.org.

of the World Summit on the Information Society and for a network crossing boundaries between sectors, regions and stakeholder groups linking comprehensively individuals and organizations that act on the belief that information and communication technologies are one of the keys to meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

17. In that light, in March 2006 the Secretary-General launched the Global Alliance for Information and Communication Technologies and Development, an initiative for promoting multi-stakeholder dialogue and partnership and providing an innovative and interactive channel for multi-stakeholder inputs to the intergovernmental policy debate. The Alliance, funded by voluntary contributions, provides an inclusive global platform for policy dialogue on the contribution of information and communication technology to advancing the achievement of internationally agreed development goals. It held its inaugural meeting in Kuala Lumpur on 19 and 20 June 2006, and its establishment was welcomed by the Economic and Social Council at its July 2006 session. The Alliance will make full use of and cooperate with existing institutions and networks (including relevant organizations of the United Nations system) and their forums, and act in support of other activities related to the follow-up to the World Summit on the Information Society. The Global Alliance will also be available to provide advice and support to the Secretary-General and the United Nations system on enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of United Nations activities through the application of ICT. The priorities identified as the focus of the work of the Global Alliance are health, education, entrepreneurship and governance.